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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 004331

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DEPARTMENT FOR TASK FORCE ONE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/28/2026  
TAGS: [PROV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TU](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: TFLE01: TURKISH DEBATE INCREASINGLY CRITICAL

REF: ANKARA 004236

Classified By: DCM Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Reactions in Turkey to the conflict in the Middle East continue to focus on humanitarian needs and the requirement for an immediate ceasefire, with commentary, both in the media and from our contacts, increasingly critical of both Israel and the U.S. Many have linked Secretary Rice's statement on the need for a New Middle East to the Broader Middle East North Africa initiative (BMENA), which they fear could result in the redrawing of their own borders. There is almost no focus on the real face of Hizbullah and Hamas; the issue is seen as one of failed policies, rather than of terrorist organizations. End summary.

Initial Humanitarian Focus  
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2. (SBU) Turks see daily in TV and newspapers the bloody images of Lebanese civilian casualties. On July 25, Vatan newspaper's front page juxtaposed two pictures -- one of wounded civilians in Lebanon, the other of Israelis sunbathing on a Mediterranean beach. PM Erdogan, vacationing, told the press the conflict had started with the Israeli "martyring" of seven children. To date, much of the story has been humanitarian, with a focus on Israeli firepower and little analysis of what Hizbullah and Hamas represent.

Shifting to Anti-Israel, Anti-US, Anti-BMENA  
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3. (C) The tone of the press has begun to shift, with columnists refocusing on what they believe Israel, on the one hand, and the U.S., on the other, are trying to accomplish. The most extreme of the Islamist press has honed in on Israel. One columnist in Milli Gazete, the mouthpiece of the Islamist Saadet Party (SP), wrote that the sole aim of the Israeli attacks on Hamas in Gaza and Hizbullah in Lebanon was Islam. Israel, he added, was not the only state at war with Islam; the U.S. was as well, as illustrated by the ultimate goals of BMENA.

4.(C) The more moderate/secular press has latched on to BMENA, a theme PM Erdogan raised at the outset of the conflict. Turkish suspicions of BMENA,s "real" goals have resurfaced, with columnists now linking BMENA to the Secretary,s statement on the need for a "new Middle East".

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Illustrating age-old Turkish paranoia about potential division of Turkey, an earlier story resurfaced, based on a Ralph Peters (U.S. military, retired) redrawing of the map of the Middle East, published in the private "Armed Forces Journal". A number of our English-speaking contacts were surprised to learn that this was not an official USG document. Republican People,s Party (CHP) vice chairman, MP (and former ambassador) Onur Oymen, stretching to connect all the dots, claimed at a press conference that Secretary Rice wants to "change the political geography" of the Middle East.

#### Skepticism of International Efforts

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15. (SBU) Initial positive coverage of FM Gul,s participation in the Rome conference to discuss a cease fire and solution to the Israel/Lebanon crisis soured when no plan emerged for an early ceasefire. One paper headlined, "The Mountain Gave Birth to a Mouse." A columnist in the Gulenist paper "Zaman" compared the situation in the Middle East to Bosnia: In Bosnia, the EU had lost credibility; the same was now true for the Middle East with respect to those who participated in the Rome conference -- their credibility was on the line. Opinions are split, however, reminiscent of the run-up to the Iraq war: another columnist in secular "Hurriyet" viewed with disdain PM adviser Davutoglu,s policy of strategic dialogue which he judged had led Turkey into a foreign relations quagmire. The possibility of participating in a peacekeeping operation in Lebanon could, he posited, help put Turkish foreign policy back on the right track.

16. (C) The possible participation of Turkish troops in a Lebanon peace-keeping operation (PKO) is also seen through a domestic lens. Opposition head Deniz Baykal, who opposes everything (including the March 1, 2003 northern option), came out against it. Islamists worry about getting on the wrong side of Syria and Iran. One columnist cynically wondered if the newfound U.S./Iraqi resolve to help fight the terrorist PKK might dissolve once Turkey agrees to participate in such a mission.

#### Tough to Defend U.S., Israel

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17. (C) Our contacts have pointed to the need for a ceasefire and a swift start to humanitarian assistance. Murat Mercan, an MP from the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), told us that while he has sympathy for Israel,s security plight, he personally could not understand Israel,s use of such overwhelming force. It has become very difficult to defend Israel or the U.S., he added, because of Secretary Rice,s statement that we should not call for a ceasefire too soon. This is a humanitarian issue, but it is also necessary to defend the rights of Palestinians and Lebanese. The current conflict should never have started; the priority now should be an immediate ceasefire.

8.(C) Mercan recognized that there was debate as to whether Hizbullah would cast an early ceasefire as a victory. There is no question in his mind, however, that the current conflict is only increasing support for Hizbullah and Hamas. If extremists such as Hizbullah and Hamas made gains in the time that led up to this conflict, he noted, then the policies that led up to that must be examined. If you exert hardship on a society, he stated, radicalization increases. FM Gul echoed one of Mercan,s points in a statement post-Rome, saying, with respect to the Secretary,s comments on the new Middle East, "This cannot be achieved by force. Regional stability can be ensured with participation of all nations. We are seeing the results of earlier impositions

and the mistakes made in the past."

¶9. (C) Turkish nationalist contacts, such as Nationalist Action Party (MHP) members Dr. Umut Ozdag and Dr. Riza Ayyan, supported Israel's right to self defense in conversations with us, but emphasized the importance of minimizing casualties. Sadi Kunderoglu, a strong secularist who works as a foreign policy advisor for AKP, noted that there have been only a few, relatively small protests against Israel in the past few weeks because, in his view, Turks care more about the plight of their fellow citizens than they do about Arab Muslims. Bilkent University International Relations professor Hasan Unal, who portrays himself to us as the voice of Anatolia, told us that Turks naturally side with the "underdog" and that is why their sympathies are with the Lebanese people and not Israel.

¶10. (C) Comment: The longer the Lebanon conflict, the more public opinion in Turkey will heat up. The U.S., including the Secretary's efforts, continues to be closely associated with Israeli actions, a perception unlikely to change. Views here may gain nuance if Turkey participates in a PKO and/or humanitarian assistance efforts, but even that can and will be used by the opposition -- SP on the Islamist flank and CHP on the left -- as a reason to protest.

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